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The Japanese Socialist Party and
Masashi Ishibashi, New JSP Chairman

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The recent choice by the Japan Socialist Party of Masashi Ishibashi as its new chairman will do little to heal the rifts within the party or reverse its steady long-term decline. There is widespread skepticism about its ability to lead Japan and it is weakened by an overdependence on organized labor. The power and influence of the JSP in the Japanese government remains minimal.

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The New Chairman Elect

Masashi Ishibashi, 58, came up through the ranks of local and prefectural labor organizations, joined the JSP in 1950, and won a lower house seat in 1955 from Nagasaki's 2nd district. A 28-year veteran of nine general elections, Ishibashi served as secretary general from 1970 to 1977 and as deputy chairman in 1982. He was the consensus choice to succeed Ichiro Asukata, who resigned to take responsibility for JSP losses in the recent upper house elections.

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Ishibashi is considered by Japanese political commentators to be the Socialist Party's top theorist and an expert on foreign policy and defense issues. A member of the JSP left wing, Ishibashi is a strong advocate of "unarmed neutrality" and of abrogating the US-Japan Security Treaty. In public statements he often supports the Soviet position on East-West issues. Even so, he has managed to remain above the constant ideological and factional infighting (pro-Soviet versus pro-Chinese, "class party" versus "national party") that has characterized the JSP.

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The Party

Ishibashi inherits a party that has been gradually losing strength since 1960. The JSP's own recent poll shows that the Japanese electorate considers the Socialists to be unstable, outdated, and unlikely to change. Commentators in the Japanese press often point to a weak party structure, especially in terms of party support for individual candidates, and a history of factional strife as reasons for this public perception. Years of serious intraparty conflict have left many Japanese with the impression that the JSP is more concerned with theories and ideologies than with the problems facing Japan. Today the JSP is held in such low esteem that even its surprising show of unity in the selection of Ishibashi as its new chairman was interpreted as a sign of weakness--that the JSP leadership decided the party could not afford another round of factional struggles. We believe this smooth transition of power covers over but does not remove the fundamental differences between the left and right wings of the Socialist Party. [redacted]

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Ties with Labor

Another factor behind the party's weakness has been its close ties with organized labor, particularly the General Council of Trade Unions in Japan (Sohyo). Over 80 percent of the total JSP membership of 64,000 belong to Sohyo, Japan's largest labor federation. Sixty percent are members of government and public workers' unions. Nonunion voters believe that the JSP is solely devoted to the interests of big labor. In the recent debate over trimming the cost of government, for example, the Socialists have opposed almost all proposals--despite their popular appeal--because many would involve firing or relocating government workers. [redacted]

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Relations with Other Opposition Parties

Any JSP ability to challenge the LDP will depend on whether the JSP is able to patch up differences with the other opposition parties. To this end Ishibashi has begun talks with the second

largest opposition party--Komeito. As the largest opposition group, the JSP is crucial to any coordinated effort, but the Socialists have so far proved unable to build a lasting coalition. Even within the JSP differences exist over whether to attempt a partnership with the Komeito, the Democratic Socialist Party and other moderates, or with the Japan Communist Party. Furthermore, most of the moderate opposition groups have more in common with--and more to gain by working with--the LDP than with the left wing of the Socialist Party. [] 25X1

Implications for the Nakasone Administration

With an extraordinary Diet session scheduled to begin in September and a lower court decision in the Tanaka/Lockheed bribery case scheduled for 12 October, the Nakasone administration could be headed for a politically turbulent fall--creating, the JSP hopes, an opportunity to make gains at LDP expense. Ishibashi has announced the JSP will force a "showdown" with Nakasone over taxes, defense spending, and a resolution calling for Tanaka's resignation from the Diet. He hopes to drive Nakasone into an early dissolution of the lower house. The Chairman-elect has also taken the unusual step of calling for anti-Tanaka forces within the LDP, as well as other opposition parties, to join the JSP in calling for Tanaka's ouster. []

The JSP rhetoric is strong but its position is not, and Ishibashi's pronouncements are as much wishful thinking as anything else. The bottom line is the LDP's solid majority of 286 seats in the 511-member lower house, to 100 seats for the Socialists. As for the next general election, the Socialist Party lacks the national organization, the funding, and the grassroots support to make significant gains--no matter when it is held. [] 25X1

Outlook

The change of leadership in the Japan Socialist Party has sparked considerable speculation and debate about the future of Japan's major opposition party. Some JSP loyalists are optimistic about the possibility of a political resurgence under Ishibashi; most Japanese political analysts are not. We believe a dramatic change in the fortunes of the Socialists is unlikely. Serious problems in party structure, a lack of intraparty harmony, and an inability to get beyond tired slogans still plague the Socialists. In the past, changes in party leadership alone have not succeeded in stopping the JSP's slow decline and there is no reason to expect Masashi Ishibashi to fare much better. [] 25X1

Today, the JSP represents at most a nuisance to Nakasone. The Socialist Party faces years of difficult rebuilding if it

ever hopes to seriously challenge the LDP. To make progress over the long run, Ishibashi will have to spend the near term healing. If he does not, the JSP will probably continue to erode.

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